DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 209 662 CS 206 532

AUTHOR Coe, Richard M.
TITLE Individualized Revision Heuristics and Other Techniques for Teaching Revision.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 14p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (32nd, Dallas, TX, March 26-28, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; Higher Education; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness; Outlines; *Revision (Written Composition)

ABSTRACT

Writing teachers can use several techniques to focus student attention on revision and to guide students, revision processes. Asking students to make an outline of what they have already written (after the draft is complete, just before the conclusion is drafted, or when the writer is blocked and does not know what to write next) enables a writer to see the structure of what she or he has been saying. After the draft is complete, the outline functions as a basis for revision. Teachers can focus student attention on the rhetorical context by having them write brief descriptions of purpose, audience, and occasion on the cover sheets of their papers. Discussion of rhetorical context in class also helps student writers realize when revision is needed. Another way to help students see the potential in revision involves helping each student develop an individualized revision heuristic. The heuristic can be prepared by analyzing students' strengths and weaknesses as writers, or by having students choose questions from coursework and textbooks, then rephrase the questions to focus attention on individual weaknesses. (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED209662

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

✓ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Individualized Revision Heuristics and Other Techniques for Teaching Revision

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Richard M. Coe

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Professor Richard M. Coe
English Department
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, B.C. V5A 1S6
Canada

This paper was originally read, in a slightly shorter form, at the 1981 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Dallas, Texas.

CS206532

Individualized Revision Heuristics and Other Techniques
for Teaching Revision

> Rewriting is the difference between the dilettante and the artist, the amateur and the professional, the unpublished and the published. William Gass testifies, "I work not by writing, but rewriting." Dylan Thomas states, "Almost any poem is fifty to a hundred revisions--and that's after it's well along. Archibald McLeish talks of the endless discipline of writing and rewriting and rewriting." Novelist Theodore Weesner tells his students at the University of New Hampshire his course title is not "Fiction Writing" but "Fiction Rewriting."
>
> --Donald Murray

> Real knowledge, as Piaget suggests, is the consequence of activity, knowledge biased to serve a specific function. Rather than teaching writing, composition courses should teach strategies for learning to rewrite.
>
> --Michael C. Flanigan and Diane S. Menendez

> The students do not have strategies for handling the whole essay. They lack procedures or heuristics to help them reorder lines of reasoning or ask questions about their purposes and readers. . . . But, unlike the students, experienced writers make changes on all levels and use all revision operations. Moreover, the operations the students fail to use--reordering and addition--seem to require a theory of the revision process as a totality--a theory which, in fact, encompasses the whole of the composition.
>
> --Nancy Sommers

What do we know about revision?

We know that effective, experienced writers generally do a lot more revision than do less effective, less experienced writers. We also know that there are qualitative differences between more and less effective writers both in what they consider while revising and in how they revise.

In principle, there are two types of changes writers can make while revising:

1. They can add, delete or substitute.[1]
2. They can reorder.

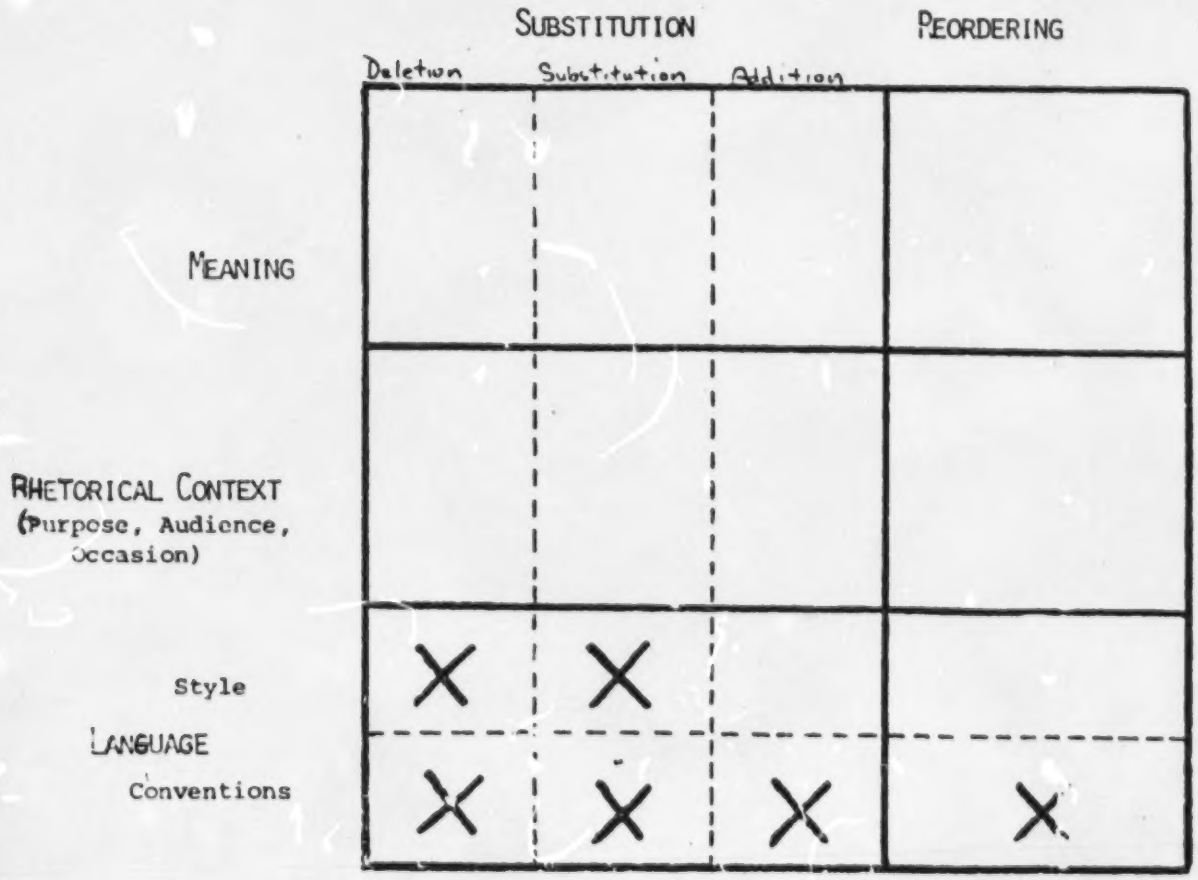
But most inexperienced writers do not reorder. They also do not usually make many additions. Their revisions consist almost entirely of low level substitutions and deletions, largely a matter of trying to avoid "wrong

---

[1]Note that technically and logically, addition and deletion are forms of substitution: addition is the substitution of something for nothing; deletion is the substitution of nothing for something.

words" and "mechanical" errors.

Experienced writers, by contrast, not only consider rearranging their drafts and making additions (usually in order to qualify, substantiate or "flesh out"), they also consider changing the substance of what they are saying (usually in order to make it "more true"), and changing how they say it (usually in order to achieve their communicative purposes with particular readers on particular occasions). The following chart represents the possible types and levels of revision.[2] The x's represent the predominant revision activities of inexperienced writers, including most university students.



TYPES OF REVISION OPERATIONS

[2] Although I have not used the technical jargon, the categories on this chart correspond to standard linguistic categories. Substitution and reordering, the two types of revision processes, correspond to selection and combination. The level of meaning corresponds to semantics, rhetorical context to pragmatics, language to lexicon and syntax (in columns one and two respectively).

The pedagogical point of the chart is that most of our students need to learn to function in the areas that they presently overlook. They need to pay more attention to semantic and pragmatic factors, and they need to give more consideration to arrangement on all levels.

The teaching of writing is a dynamic discipline: it is less a matter of describing and analyzing the qualities of good writing (though this is necessary) than of intervening effectively in students' writing processes. In the end, it is the written text that must communicate with readers; but the best way to improve the quality of the written text is to improve the process that produces it. If we can get students to write the way more effective, experienced writers do, they will produce pieces of writing more like the ones those writers produce.

To begin with, we must motivate our students to revise more. They must be convinced that good writers do revise. The texts produced by good writers often flow so smoothly that readers tend to assume those texts must have flowed equally smoothly out of the writers' pens and typewriters. Despite a few well publicized cases of inspiration, this is generally not the case. So I offer students the testimony of well-known writers, such as those quoted above; I also show them copies of manuscript pages, such as those reproduced in the Paris Review's Writers at Work series, with the visible revisions of famous authors.[3] (Sometimes I even show them my own first drafts--because the difference between my first drafts and theirs is not nearly so great as the difference between my final versions and theirs.)[4]

The main purpose of this paper is to suggest several techniques that students can use to focus their attention and guide their revision processes. First, however, the entire question of revision should be put into its contexts.

Like any creative process, writing is well begun by generating potentials: information, images, phrasings, and plans about how they might be used. From

---

[3]For a collection of quotations and facsimiles of manuscript pages, see my Form and Substance: An Advanced Rhetoric (New York and Toronto: John Wiley & Sons, 1981), pp. 76-80, 82, 84, 87, 92, and 94.

[4]To end with, students must be convinced that the work they put into revision will be rewarded; in large part, that depends on how we and our colleagues in other courses respond to their writing. That, however, is the subject for another article.

the mid-1960s through the late-1970s, the main focus of research on the composing process was on this aspect, called pre-writing by D. Gordon Rohman in 1966. The tendency to emphasize rhetorical invention as the first phase of the composing process also dominated innovative pedagogy and textbooks in the early 1970s. This emphasis was a useful corrective to the traditional North American and British separation of writing from thinking (a tradition that can be traced at least to Peter Ramus), which reduced the composing process to little more than the stylistic problem of choosing words to represent ideas that had been previously thought out. The revival of interest in discovery processes was a concrete criticism of the linear and mentalistic model which suggests that we first observe, second think (and perhaps feel) and third express our thoughts.

But, as Richard Young has pointed out, Rohman's model--'writing consists of pre-writing, writing, and re-writing'--is also "essentially linear and mentalistic."[5] The implication remains that discovery precedes real writing (as does the implication that revision is something less than a re-envisioning). We know, however, that revision starts early in the composing process, perhaps even before the first word is put on paper. We also know that discovery is often stimulated by revision (e.g., when the awareness of a "wrong word" leads to the awareness of an inadequate concept). As Gary Tate has said, "The search for a better word is a search for a better vision."[6] The underlying

---

[5]"Invention: A Topographical Survey," Teaching Composition: 10 Bibliographical Essays, Gary Tate, ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University, 1976), p. 17. Cf., D. Gordon Rohman, "Pre-Writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process," College Composition and Communication, 16 (May 1965), pp. 106-112; and D. Gordon Rohman and Albert O. Wlecke, Pre-Writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, U.S. Office of Education Cooperative Research Project No. 2174, 1964). More sophisticated recent models of the composing process, based on such notions as recursive feedback loops, are still essentially lineal and reductive representations. Writing is more usefully understood as a process that evolves toward meaning and communication as it adapts to a complex hierarchy of constraints of various types--a process that can be modeled accurately only in terms of dialectical interactions and supra-linear movements, but which can be simulated by analyzing the constraints.

[6]"Searching for a Romantic Rhetoric," A Symposium in Rhetoric (Denton, TX: Texas Women's University, 1975), p.6.

error, which has been cogently discussed by Kenneth Burke, is the assumption that a category which is logically prior to another must also come first in time (i.e., must also be temporally prior).[7]

Like any creative process, writing is brought to fruition by a process of critical selection and arrangement. Material must be generated, perhaps using the discovery techniques that have been emphasized by recent innovators, and then it must be culled. Like a gardener whose seeds have sprouted and whose young fruit trees are starting to branch, a writer must cut, thin, transplant, graft, prune and refertilize.

Of course, the two processes--generation and selection--interpenetrate: writers do not first uncritically generate a complete set of potential meanings, words and arrangements, and second select the ones that serve their purposes. Because of the emphases of the past fifteen years or so, we as a profession have an adequate complement of techniques for teaching students the generative aspect of the creative process. What we lack--largely because we have deemphasized rhetorical arrangement (dispositio) while emphasizing ideas (inventio) and style (elocutio)--is a set of techniques for teaching students how to regenerate material by a process of critical selection and rearrangement. The emphasis on writing as a creative process has also, unfortunately, sometimes produced a deemphasis of writing as a communicative process: a coherent process approach must emphasize both of the processes that surround the written text, as well as the linguistic, cognitive and affective processes that underly it.

As rhetorical theorists from Plato to Richard Weaver have insisted, the first principle of selection is truth. The writing process has its own rhythms and its own internal logic. Very often it generates statements with which the writer, upon careful consideration, cannot fully agree. It is quite amazing what can happen to a draft if one stops at each assertion to ask, "To what extent is this true?" This question both compensates for the tendency of student writers to overgeneralize (especially in introductory and concluding passages) and generates a type of revision that is critically important in most academic and professional discourse: careful qualification of assertions. (Note that this type of revision is effected by making additions, a type of revision activity neglected by inexperienced writers.)

---

[7] See, for example, "Poetics in Particular, Language in General" in Language as Symbolic Action (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1966), esp. pp. 32-37.

"Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what one is saying," asserts John Updike. "I don't know what I think until I see what I've said," declares E. M. Forster. It is important to look back over each draft to see what it says. But that is difficult because we tend to read into our drafts what we meant to say. One technique for finding out what a draft says is to write a brief summary statement, i.e., an abstract. Such a statement should be short. For a ten-page paper, perhaps one to two hundred words. A summary of this length is harder to produce than one of twenty or a thousand words. It requires more than a thesis statement, but it still forces the writer to pick out only what is most important.

Such a summary statement should be easy to produce. The more difficult it is, the more important it is--because the difficulty usually indicates that the writer cannot articulate precisely what the main points are. Having created the short summary statement, one should then ask oneself some questions about it. Key questions to ask include the following:

1. To what extent is this true? Does it need to be qualified or modified? Have I considered important exceptions?
2. What has been left out? Have I considered all important and relevant aspects of the subject?
3. How does each section (or paragraph) of the paper relate to these main points?
4. How do I know this is true? What are some good examples of it?
5. So what?

(Note: the underlined questions can also be used to generate a developed paragraph--complete with qualified topic sentence, logical and exemplary support, and statement of implications--from a simple assertion. For a paragraph, one example is usually adequate.)

Note that all these questions lead to additions and rearrangements. As Mina Shaughnessy has asserted, the inexperienced writer "often seems to halt at the boundary of each sentence rather than move on, by gradations of subsequent comment, to an elaboration of the sentence"; one of the significant characteristics of the work of better writers is "extent of elaboration."[8] It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the significant revision activities of experienced writers is addition, which can produce the sort of elaboration and modification of the original point that Frances Christensen calls "texture."

---

[8] Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford, 1977), pp. 226-227.

Questions three, four and five lead us--still on the level of meaning--toward considerations of order. The interrelations among statements within a piece of writing are often more important to the formulation of meaning than the individual statements. When people complain about students' inability to write adequately, their basic concern is often with structure more than with substance or style. As I. A. Richards said in 1936,

> Most words, as they pass from context to context, change their meanings; and in many different ways . . . . It is the peculiarity of meanings that they do so mind their company; that is in part what we mean by calling them meanings.[9]

As the work of Frances Christensen and others has made clear, the most important characteristic of a unified piece of writing is the proper relationship among statements of various levels of generality. What has traditionally been called unity and coherence in writing is created not only by making certain that all particulars are relevant to the general proposition with which they appear, but also by observing proper relationships among levels of generality.[10] That means thinking about order. It is also why rearrangement --cutting and pasting--is often one of the quickest and easiest ways to improve a draft.

The much maligned outline--presented in a new context that gives it a new meaning--is one technique that can help students perform this kind of revision. I call this technique "outline later" because it is used during or after, rather than before, drafting. I ask students to make an outline of what is already written, either after the draft is complete or just before the conclusion is drafted or at any time during the drafting when the writer is blocked and does not know what to write next.[11]

---

[9] The Philosophy of Rhetoric (London: Oxford, 1936), pp. 10-11.

[10] See Frances Christensen, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Paragraph," College Composition and Communication, 16 (October 1965), pp. 144-156; Frank D'Angelo, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Essay," College Composition and Communication, 25 (December 1974), pp. 388-396; Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations, pp. 226-257; Ellen Nold and Brent Davis, "The Discourse Matrix," College Composition and Communication, 31 (May 1980), pp. 141-152; and Richard Coe, Form and Substance, pp. 95 - 99. These rhetoricians share a useful and simple device, developed by Christensen, for analyzing the logical structure of verbal discourse.

[11] All the writer needs to do is to write down the main point of each section or paragraph, preferably in sentence form. Often these sentences are already in the draft and need only be copied out. If not, they are relatively easy to compose since they are nothing more than summaries of assertions already implicit in the draft.

cont'd ... 8

The purpose of such an outline is to enable a writer to see the structure of what she or he has been saying. Instead of three or five or ten pages of messy draft, the writer now has a sentence outline of less than a page, which reveals the underlying structure of the draft it represents (literally, re-presents). Looking at that outline on a single piece of paper, the writer can see the pattern of meaning.

If the writer is blocked in mid-draft, the pattern of what has been said often suggests what else needs to be said and what logically comes next. Because the outline functions as a summary of main points, it often virtually writes a missing conclusion. In either case, it serves to get the writer writing again, serves to help the writer discover the missing part of the draft.

After the draft is complete, the outline functions as a basis for revision. The key question is this: does the pattern of meaning make sense as it stands or would it make more sense if these propositions were reordered? The outline, since it represents the underlying structure, enables the writer to see and judge that whole pattern of meaning. The key question also breaks down into various more specific questions:

> Is each point where it belongs in relation to the points that encompass it?
>
> Do the various sections support the main point(s) or theme(s) of the whole writing?
>
> Do the various paragraphs support the sections?
>
> Do the examples exemplify what they are supposed to?
>
> Is there support for each generalization?

Imbalances in the development of the writing are likely to stand out like proverbial sore thumbs once outlined.

Inexperienced writers often look at a draft and fail to see the cues that indicate revision is needed. The outline, applied after rather than before drafting, is a technique that can help writers see some of those cues. It moves their attention from particular words to the structure of the whole writing. It helps them see organization--and dis- or mis-organization. Thus it helps them perceive potentials for revision.

It is similarly useful to focus student writers' attention on the

---

To transform this list of assertions into an outline, one must classify them according to level of generality. One must mark the most general statements, those that seem to encompass the others. The traditional way to mark them, of course, is with Roman numerals; or one can follow Christensen and call them "level 1 generalizations." The remaining statements are subclassified (perhaps with capital letters, Arabic numerals, and lower case letters; perhaps as "level 2 generalizations," level 3 generalizations," etc.)

rhetorical context, classically described as purpose, audience, and occasion. Within a process approach to the development of writing abilities, this is the basis of objectivity and evaluation. Will the piece of writing achieve its intended purpose(s) with its intended reader(s) in the situation(s) in which it will be read? In short, will the communicative process succeed? The evidence is unequivocable that experienced writers devote much more attention to rhetorical context--especially audience--than do most student writers. Especially during revision, experienced writers are very much concerned with the appropriateness of the draft to the rhetorical context.

To focus students' attention on rhetorical context, I often have them write on the cover sheet of the paper a brief description of rhetorical context, distinguishing, if necessary, between primary and secondary purposes, readers, and occasions. Here is an example of one such statement:

> My main point (meaning) is that dolphins are a wonderful and endangered species. My purpose is to convince readers to support political action to protect dolphins. Most of my readers (primary audience) will be residents of British Columbia. They will read what I have written on the occasion of a visit to the Vancouver Aquarium, where it will be handed to them on a leaflet.

As this sample indicates, I think a persuasive paper is a particularly good time to focus students' attention on rhetorical context. Since a student's paper is an exercise, the rhetorical context is, of course, a fiction; the real reader is the instructor and the real purpose to obtain a good grade. At least once during the semester, I also have students actually write out a description of their primary audience. Minimally, I ask for an estimate of the primary readers' knowledge about the subject, their relevant attitudes and beliefs, their vested interests, and their level of reading ability.

Having focused students' attention on rhetorical contexts, I then refuse to accept or grade any paper that, in my opinion, would not minimally achieve its intended purpose(s) with its primary audience on the occasion the writer has chosen. This refusal is kind, gentle, and accompanied by a clear explanation. It is also firm. This bottom line refusal is a taste of reality: it is exactly what an editor or supervisor would do. A piece of writing that will not achieve its primary purpose is pointless in the real world. Students often do not put adequate effort into revision until they realize that. Turning an inadequate paper back for further revision is a good way to get the point across. (Stipulating a rhetorical context is also a good way for an instructor to make grading standards objective: simply stipulate a context that really

would demand whatever qualities you desire in the piece of writing.)

Discussion of rhetorical context is one way to help student writers perceive cues indicating revision is needed. Another way to help them see those potentials for revision is to help each student develop an individualized revision-heuristic. This means a set of questions designed to focus that student's attention on that student's particular weaknesses, on the flaws most likely to appear in that student's drafts. Since a person's attention is limited, these questions should be grouped, thereby allowing the student to concentrate on one kind of question at a time. (One good way to group them is according to the three levels of revision charted above; then the writer can concentrate first on truth-value, then on rhetorical context, and then on language.) The questions and the procedure for using them are artificial, a temporary crutch to be used as a learning device until the student can perceive cues for revision without them.

I help students generate their own revision-heuristics in two ways. One is through an analysis of their own strengths and weaknesses as writers.[12] Many of the items on the list of weaknesses are best dealt with by creating questions to focus attention on them during revision. Thus some of the questions are responses to perceived weaknesses (e.g., "Did I use commas correctly with conjunctions in this writing?") The other way I help students generate revision-heuristics is by giving them a list of questions at the end of each unit of the course. For instance, I have a set of questions about how a piece of writing is adapted to rhetorical context, another set about titles, openings, transitions, and conclusions, another set about voice and persona, etc. Each student chooses only those questions that match her or his individual needs, rephrasing them more specifically to focus attention on individual weaknesses.

---

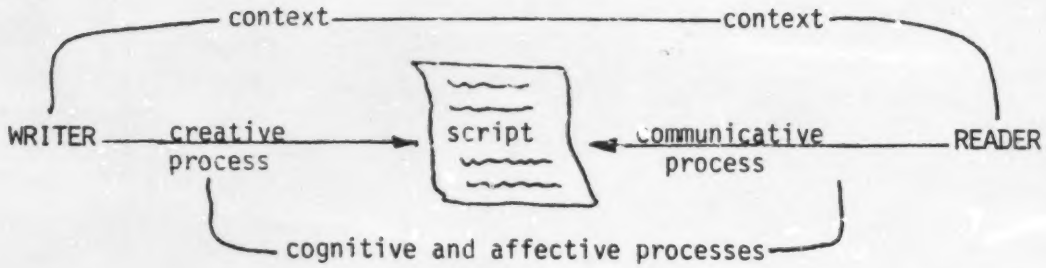
[12] Careful definition of a writer's weaknesses--not just the pointing out of particular errors--is the basis of effective intervention. University students can do much of this analysis themselves; it need not be the instructor's duty. See Richard Coe and Kris Gutierrez, "Using Problem-Solving and Process-Analysis to Help Students Solve Writing Problems," College Composition and Communication, forthcoming. Cf., also Ellen Nold's self-published Managing Writing and Mary Beavin, "Individualized Goal Setting, Self-Evaluation, and Peer Evaluation," in Charles Cooper and Lee Odell, eds., Evaluating Writing (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1977), pp. 135-154.

In the end, it is not the writing process, but the written product that matters. Although we can make useful generalizations, different people write differently. There is no reason to demand conformity, no reason to intervene in a student's writing process unless there is a problem in the written product produced by that process. What I have offered in this paper is a group of techniques for intervening in one phase of that process when necessary.

I have also tried to show how those techniques are derived from theory of composition. There is increasingly sophisticated theory of composition, based on a growing and increasingly coherent body of empirical information about writing (and other composing processes). Both for practical effectiveness and to justify the teaching of writing at university as a humanistic discipline, our teaching should be based on that theory.

Appendix 1

The Process Approach



The teaching process involves intervening in the various creative, communicative, and cognitive-affective processes encompassing and underlying the writing.

COMMUNICATIVE PROCESS: If writing is to be understood as a communicative act, every writing assignment must stipulate not only subject matter (topic), but also purpose, audience, scene, and genre. (In most school writing, of course, these will usually be fictions.)

E.g., write a letter (genre) to the ICBC customer relations department (audience) demanding the restoration of your safe driver discount (purpose), which was taken away from you without notice or reason (topic) according to the bill you just received from them (scene).

E.g., write a research paper (genre) on the Rebellion of 1837 (topic) for your history teacher (audience) in order to demonstrate that you understand how to research and present an historical event on your own and that you therefore deserve a good grade (purpose) in your history class (scene).

COGNITIVE PROCESS: Insofar as students do not have the cognitive abilities (e.g., ability to distinguish levels of generality, abstract/concrete, or opinion/fact) or affective abilities (e.g., ability to imagine the perspectives of their readers) a process approach should include activities designed to develop these abilities.

CREATIVE PROCESS: Students should be guided through the various phases of the writing process. Although most real writers actually work more chaotically, for pedagogical purposes we divide the process into five phases. Insofar as students do not already know how to do so, every writing assignment should include activities designed to guide them through these phases.

1. GENERATION of material and communicative strategies.
2. Selection and COMPOSITION of that material into a unified and sensible draft.
3. REFORMULATION of that draft to make it both more true and more effective. (This should include considering possible reorganizations and additions as well as deletions and substitutions.)
4. EDITING for conformity with appropriate conventions.
5. "PUBLICATION" (i.e., delivery to readers).

Prof. R. Coe
English Dept.
Simon Fraser U.